

The Teaching of Christ

by W.H. Griffith Thomas

W.H. Griffith Thomas explores the profound impact and characteristics of Christ's teaching, emphasizing its authority, uniqueness, and relevance throughout the ages.

Scripture: Matthew 7:29, Matthew 11:27, Matthew 24:35, Mark 2:10, Luke 4:22, Luke 4:32, John 3:3, John 7:26, John 7:46, Acts 20:35

Topics: "Christ's Teaching", "Kingdom Of God"

Description

W.H. Griffith Thomas delves into the profound teaching of Jesus Christ, emphasizing the impact He had on His contemporaries and the timeless relevance of His message. The essence of Christ's teaching revolves around revealing God as the Father and the Kingdom of God, emphasizing redemption from sin, forgiveness, and the potential for transformed human life. Christ's teaching is characterized by its universal appeal, completeness, and inexhaustible nature, with a focus on repentance, trust, and love. The uniqueness of Christ's teaching lies not only in its content but in the association of His teachings with His own Person, making Him the central focus and authority of His message.

Transcript

For several years past great emphasis has been laid on the teaching of Christ. Some of the best books of modern days are on this subject. The teaching of Jesus Christ has been examined, explored, explained, classified, and applied as never before. This is all to the good, for it leads inevitably to the consideration of the Teacher Himself. The Gospels leave no doubt as to the impression made by Christ as "a Teacher come from God." The opening of His ministry struck the keynote: "Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God," and all through those three years, preaching and teaching formed a large and essential part of His work.

The effect of His teaching on His contemporaries was marked and continuous. At every stage they were impressed by Him. The "understanding and answers" which at the age of twelve astonished the teachers in the Temple gave promise of what was abundantly evident in after-years. It will help us to understand His teaching more thoroughly today if we first endeavor to gain an idea of how it impressed His earliest hearers. At the opening of His ministry the people of Nazareth were astonished at the graciousness of His utterances (Luke 4:22).

There was a glow of grace and love, an accent of persuasiveness, a note of considerateness, a touch of tenderness in what He said that deeply impressed them. On another occasion the authoritativeness of His

teaching was the prominent feature (Matt. 7:29). In contrast with their own teachers, He seemed to speak from personal knowledge, and the force of His convictions awed them. In close association with this was His boldness (John 7:26). Unlettered though He was, there was no timidity or self-consciousness, no hesitation as to what He felt to be truth.

Without any thought of Himself or His audience, He spoke out fearlessly on every occasion, utterly heedless of the consequences to Himself, and only concerned for truth and the delivery of His Father's message. The power of His teaching was also deeply felt. "His word was with power" (Luke 4:32). The spiritual force of His personality expressed itself in His utterances and held His hearers in enthralling grasp. And so we are not surprised to read of the impression of uniqueness made by Him.

"Never man spake like this Man" (John 7:46). The simplicity and charm and the depth, the directness and yet the universality, the charm and yet the truth of His teaching made a deep mark on His hearers, and elicited the conviction that they were in the presence of a Teacher such as man had never known before. And thus the large proportion of teaching in the Gospels, and the impressions evidently created by the Teacher Himself, are such that we are not at all surprised that years afterward the great Apostle of the Gentiles should recall these things and say, "Remember the words of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 20:35).

The same impression has been made in every age since the days of Christ and His immediate followers, and in any full consideration of His Person as the substance of Christianity great attention must necessarily be paid to His teaching. What, then, was the substance of His teaching, which has been so attractive to the world? First and foremost, His teaching about God. Two ideas perhaps sum it up; the Kingdom of God and the Fatherhood of God. The term "Kingdom of God" is found over one hundred times in the Gospels and in every part of the ministry from the outset to end.

Its central idea is the reign and rule of God over human life, and it was the theme of Christ's preaching from the first. "The Kingdom of God" was the earliest word in Jerusalem (John 3:3) and in Galilee (Mark 1:15), and the theme is found in sermon, parable, and prophecy to the close of His ministry. Man ruled over by God, and thereby finding the full realization of life: this is the essence of the idea of the Kingdom of God. The Fatherhood of God is equally characteristic of Christ's teaching, and although it was known in part before by reason of God's unique covenant relation to Israel, it came with all the force and freshness of a new revelation.

While the holiness and majesty of God as emphasized in Old Testament times were presupposed and taken for granted, the thought of Fatherhood was added, giving richness and fullness to the message, and joy and hope to the hearers. This Fatherhood was essentially spiritual and ethical, and correlated with a spiritual and ethical sonship, and was proclaimed with such frequency and variety that it had all the glory of a new revelation concerning God's relation to man. And so from the day of Christ we have had ideas of God, and of God in relation to man, that the world never knew before Christ came.

Our highest and best knowledge, indeed almost all we know of God, has come from or through Him. The very high ideas of God which some men say are impossible of practical realization have really come from Christ. In close connection with Christ's teaching about God was His message of forgiveness for man. It was soon evident that He had come not only to reveal, but also to redeem. The fact of sin was therefore emphasized and the need of deliverance from it pointed out. On the paralytic brought for healing, Jesus Christ bestowed first of all man's deepest need, forgiveness, and all through His ministry in a variety of ways sin and redemption were prominent features of His teaching.

The burden of human iniquity and the bounty of Divine mercy were His themes. No wonder the "common people heard Him gladly" (Mark 7:37), or that "sinners" flocked to Him (Luke 15:1). It was the glory of His ministry that He brought peace and rest to weary, sin-stricken hearts by His message of a free, full forgiveness. In the face of murmuring and opposition He justified His conduct by saying that "the Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). Arising out of this message of redemption was another closely allied to it - the value and possibility of human life when thus redeemed.

"How much, then, is a man better than a sheep?" (Matt. 12:12). This, too, may be said to have been a keynote of Christ's teaching. The possibility of redemption from sin and of becoming a child of God in ethical relationship led immediately and naturally to the great truth of the possibility of holiness and service. "Born again," and within the Kingdom of God (John 3:3, 5), the redeemed soul can grow and expand, and deepen into untold capabilities of character, conduct, and usefulness.

As no heart was too hard for His mercy, so no life was too poor for His grace. There was hope for the worst and encouragement for the feeblest through the infinite possibilities of Divine love and grace. These three great truths concerning God, forgiveness, and human life, expressing as they do the three ideas of Revelation, Redemption and Restoration, may be said to summarize and include all the important and essential elements of Christ's teaching. While He never taught systematically, there are certain "ruling ideas" [D'Arcy.

Ruling Ideas of Our Lord, Preface.] which may be regarded as the cardinal points of His message. He came to bring God to men and to bring men to God: this sums up all His teaching. If the substance of Christ's teaching is noteworthy, so also are its characteristics. Not only the immediate hearers but readers of the Gospels in all ages have been attracted and impressed by the way in which the teaching was given. Other religions have had their ethical ideals of duty, opportunity, and even of love, but nowhere have they approached those of Christ either in reality or in attractiveness or in power.

Christ's message is remarkable for its universal adaptation. Its appeal is universal; it is adapted to all men from the adult down to the child; it makes its appeal to all times, and not merely to the age in which it was first given. And the reason of this is that it emphasizes a threefold ethical attitude towards God and man which makes a universal appeal as nothing else does or perhaps can do. Christ calls for repentance, trust and love. Repentance in relation to Sin; Trust in relation to God; and Love in relation to God and man.

Nowhere else do we find this specific appeal. The universal obligation of Repentance, Trust and Love is the peculiar contribution of Christianity to the ethics of the world. The completeness of Christ's teaching is also to be observed. It touches life at every point, from the regulation of the thoughts and motives to the control of the will and conduct. Its moral ideal is love to God and man, and in this is a unity which binds in one all the elements of the spiritual life. Its emphasis on humility and its exclusion of fame and reputation, its refusal to pander to any personal interest, its insistence on the passive virtues, thereby practically adding an entirely new realm of morality - all show the completeness of Christ's ethic.

Nor can we fail to see this also in the fact that since the days of Christ, in spite of all the progress of thought, not a single new ethical ideal has been given to the world. The inexhaustibleness of the teaching of Christ is constantly being realized. Generation after generation finds in it what is new, fresh and inspiring. Christ said, "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away" (Matt. 24:35), and every day brings fresh proof of the truth of this statement.

Never did the Speaker seem to stand more utterly alone than when He uttered this majestic utterance. Never did it seem more improbable that it should be fulfilled. But as we look across the centuries we see how it has been realized. His words have passed into laws, they have passed into doctrines, they have passed into proverbs, they have passed into consolations, but they have never "passed away". What human teacher ever dared to claim an eternity for his words? [Macleary, St.

Mark, The Cambridge Bible for Schools, p. 149.] From this it follows naturally that Christ's teaching has a permanence all its own. It is not discarded and set aside as obsolete even by the greatest thinkers of the world. Christ's teaching is almost as remarkable for what it omits as for what it includes. One of the strongest pieces of objective evidence in favour of Christianity is not sufficiently enforced by apologists. Indeed I am not aware that I have ever seen it mentioned.

It is the absence from the biography of Christ of any doctrines which the subsequent growth of human knowledge - whether in natural science, ethics, political economy, or elsewhere - has had to discount. This negative argument is really almost as strong as is the positive one from what Christ did teach. For when we consider what a large number of sayings are recorded of - or at least attributed to - Him, it becomes most remarkable that in literal truth there is no reason why any of His words should ever pass away in the sense of becoming obsolete ...

Contrast Jesus Christ in this respect with other thinkers of like antiquity. Even Plato, who, though some four hundred years before Christ in point of time, was greatly in advance of Him in respect of philosophic thought, is nowhere in this respect as compared with Christ. Read the Dialogues, and see how enormous is the contrast with the Gospels in respect of errors of all kinds, reaching even to absurdity in respect of reason, and to sayings shocking to the moral sense. Yet this is confessedly the highest level of human reason on the lines of spirituality when unaided by alleged revelation. [G.

J. Romanes, Thoughts on Religion. p. 157.] From all this it is not surprising, therefore, to observe the authoritativeness of Christ's teaching. Both in His earthly ministry and ever since, men have realized that He speaks "with authority," and that His words are final. There is a sureness, an absence of doubt and hesitation about what He says; He does not recall, or modify, or safeguard, or add. Within the limits of His sphere there is no correction, and while whole continents of knowledge were outside His plan, there was no indication of error in what He actually said.

While His knowledge was limited by the conditions and requirements of His earthly manifestation, it was infallible within those limitations. His words carried conviction even in the face of opposition. Although He was denied and rejected, yet He could not be gainsaid; it was so evident that He lived all He taught. That sinless consciousness is the fountainhead of our faith and our morals. We can no more get beyond Jesus than we can sail past the North Star. Whole chapters of Aristotle are out of date.

Some sections of Paradise Lost now seem unworthy of the writer and unmeaning to the reader. But just as the sense of beauty culminated in Greece some twenty-three centuries ago, so that all our artists bend in admiration over a poor fragment of the Elgin marbles, so the revelation of ethical standards culminated in Palestine. The Parthenon, battered and crumbling, shows us a building beyond which architecture may not go. We may build something different - something more nearly perfect no man hopes to build.

So character reached its supreme embodiment and standard in Jesus of Nazareth. We desire no new edition of the Sermon on the Mount, and no modification of the Golden Rule. We can easily surpass Jesus in the length of His life, or the quantity of His labour, or in the amount of His human knowledge. In quality

and revealing power He is unsurpassable and final. Different men there may be and should be; but in the realm of character and religion a greater master and leader the world will never see. [W.

H. P. Faunce. *The Educational Ideal in the Ministry*, p. 33.] Not least of all these characteristics is the verifiableness of Christ's teaching. He who "wills to do His will shall know of the doctrine" (John 7:17). It is a thing which verifies itself in human lives because it possesses a dynamic, a special and unique power for making itself a force in the hearts of men. It introduces into morality an entirely new spirit, the filial spirit, the joyous response of a child to a Father.

No longer merely under obligation to an impersonal law, the disciple of Christ realizes, is conscious of, and obedient to, the will of a loving Father. Love to Christ is the response of the soul, and: It is the only thing in the region of moral motives that can be described as an imperishable yet convertible force, whose changes of form never mean decrease of energy or loss of power. [Fairbairn, *Christ in Modern Theology*, p. 380.] No wonder, then, that the original hearers of Christ were impressed by the "charm" of His words, or that succeeding ages should have pondered His words and placed them high above all others as the supreme and final word in ethics.

Some years since Sir Edwin Arnold, the distinguished poet, and author of *The Light of Asia*, and Dr. William Ashmore of China, the heroic and renowned American missionary, met each other on a Pacific steamship. "I have been criticized," said Sir Edwin Arnold to Dr. Ashmore, "for an implied comparison between Buddhism and Christianity in regard to the doctrines derived from them and the principles contained in them respectively. No such object was in my mind. For me, Christianity, rightly viewed, is the crowned queen of religions, and immensely superior to every other; and though I am so great an admirer of much that is great in Hindu philosophy and religion, I would not give away one verse of the Sermon on the Mount for twenty epic poems like the Mahabharata, nor exchange the Golden Rule for twenty new Upanishads." [Hoyt, *The Lord's Teaching concerning His own Person*, p. 42.

See also a fine passage in A. C. Benson's *The House of Quiet*. p. 71.] But it may be asked, it often is asked, wherein lay the originality, the uniqueness of Christ's teaching? Wherein was He so really and essentially different from other teachers that He is removed entirely out of the same category? Now it may at once be said that the fact, the admitted fact, that Christian ethic is the highest the world has ever seen is in itself no proof of its divine origin. It may be only the highest and best experienced thus far in the evolution of human thought and endeavor.

Nor should it be surprising if we find in Christ's teaching much that is found elsewhere, for the simple reason that human nature and its ethical needs are practically the same under all circumstances, and it would have been impossible for Jesus to have avoided emphasizing those essential features of life and duty which are common to all. Originality, therefore, is not of supreme moment. Lotze and Harnack regard as the great point in which Christianity is unique the value it assigns to each individual man in its assertion that every man is a child of God. [Lotze, *Microcosmos*, vol. ii, book 8, ch. 4, "The Religious Life."

Harnack, *What is Christianity*, p. 63 ff., 68, 70 ff.] Other points emphasized by Harnack as characteristic of Christianity as of no other religion are the severance of the existing connection between ethics and external forms of religion; the insistence on the root of morality in the intention and disposition; the concentration on the one basis and motive - love, and the combination of religion and morality in the union of love and humility. Thus the problem of accounting for Christ as a Teacher is a very real one.

How are we to explain the substance and characteristics of His teaching in view of all the circumstances of His life, race and environment? It is sometimes said, Everything that Jesus said had been said before Him by others. Let us grant that it is true, what then? Originality may or may not be a merit. If the truth has already been uttered, the merit lies in repeating it, and giving it new and fuller application. But there are other considerations to be borne in mind. We have no other teacher who so completely eliminated the trivial, the temporal, the false from his system, no one who selected just the eternal and the universal, and combined them in a teaching where all these great truths found their congenial home.

These parallels from the teaching of others to that of Christ are brought together from this quarter and from that; how was it that none of these teachers furnishes us with any parallel to the teaching of Christ as a whole, while each of them gives us such truths as He expresses mingled with a mass of what is trivial and absurd? How was it that a carpenter, of no special training, ignorant of the culture and learning of the Greeks, born of a people whose great teachers were narrow, sour, intolerant, pedantic legalists, was the supreme religious Teacher the world has known, whose supremacy here makes Him the most important figure in the world's history? [Peake, Christianity: Its Nature and its Truth, p. 226 f.]

But the real newness of Christ as a Teacher is found in His Person rather than in what He said or in the way He said it. The unique contribution Christ makes to ethics Himself. It is the way in which He associates His teaching with Himself that demands and commands attention. He connects the Kingdom of God with Himself as King. He links the Fatherhood of God with Himself as the unique Revealer (Matt. 11:27). He associates Forgiveness with His own prerogative and authority (Mark 2:10).

He teaches the value of possibilities of human life in intimate connection with Himself as its Master here and its Judge hereafter. There is no word of His teaching which He does not in some way make to depend on Himself. We can see this in the Gospels at every stage from the first to the last. His teaching is a revelation of Himself. His ministry was marked off in three great periods, in each of which He was occupied mainly and predominantly with one particular subject. Not that these are absolutely distinguished or that they do not overlap, but they are defined with sufficient clearness to allow of our observing the great theme of each period.

His ministry commenced with the preaching of the Kingdom of God (Matt. 4:17). In this period Christ was essentially and pre-eminently the Prophet. The Sermon on the Mount, the Parables, and other teaching were all concentrated on the Kingdom. This part of the ministry culminated in the confession of St. Peter at Caesarea Philippi. At that time and thenceforward we observe a marked change (Matt. 16:21), and the main subject of His teaching was His approaching suffering and death.

In a variety of ways this theme was uppermost until a few days before His death. It may be said to culminate in the incident associated with the desire of the Greeks to see Christ (John 12:21). These references to His atoning death naturally associated themselves with the idea of Jesus as a Priest and Sacrifice. Then from the triumphal entry on Palm Sunday we are at once conscious of yet another change, and He appears before the people and before His disciples in a new guise.

The entry itself with its publicity was quite different from His former attitude of secrecy. His teaching began to refer to the future, and became largely eschatological. Parables of judgment and predictions of His own coming stood out prominently in the teaching of that week, and in all this Jesus Himself assumes the attitude of King and Judge. There is nothing more striking in the Gospels than this royal and judicial element in the events and teaching of the closing days of His earthly life.

And thus His teaching all through the Gospels is summed up in His mission, and this is threefold. In the language of theology, He came to be Prophet, Priest and King. As Prophet He reveals God to man; as Priest He redeems man for God; as King He rules and judges mankind. Revelation, Redemption, Rule - these constitute His mission, and each point is found in His teaching. He interprets God to man, He brings man to God and God to man, and He exercises Divine authority in relation to man.

For the spiritual life of man these three offices meet three human needs, spiritual, illumination and government. In the Old Testament these offices were never blended in one person; there were separate prophets, priests, and kings, but in Christ they met for the first time and blended, and in this completeness of Divine provision man's life is satisfied and blessed. Hence it is not so much in the ideas of Christianity that its superiority is seen as in the dynamic for realizing them, a dynamic found in the relation of the soul to Christ and to those who are in like manner associated with Christ in a society of His followers.

Now it is this association, definite, intimate and essential, between Christ's teaching and Himself that constitutes the real problem. He Himself is the real theme of His teaching. This is certainly a unique feature among the teachers of the world. A true teacher usually keeps himself in the background and makes his message prominent. But here Jesus Christ is Himself the Truth, and is at once the Subject of His teaching and the Medium through whom Truth is to be perceived and received.

His words were so completely parts and utterances of Himself, that they had no meaning as abstract statements of truth uttered by Him as a Divine oracle or prophet. Take away Himself as the primary (though not the ultimate) subject of every statement and they all fall to pieces. [Hort, *The Way, the Truth, and the Life*, p. 207.] This is the absolutely unique contribution of Christ to ethics, Himself. There is scarcely a passage in the Gospels without the self-assertion of Jesus coming out in connection with His teaching.

His message and His claims are really inextricable. We have already seen what this self-assertion means in general (ch. 3), but one element may be specially emphasized here in connection with His teaching. In His eschatological teaching Jesus refers to Himself as Judge of the world. Do we realize what this means and involves? A young Jewish carpenter claims to be the judge of all mankind! The place assigned in the last judgment to Himself in the words of Jesus is recognized by all interpreters to imply that the ultimate fate of men is to be determined by their relation to Him.

He is the standard by which all shall be measured; and it is to Him as the Saviour that all who enter into eternal life will owe their felicity. But the description of Himself as Judge implies much more than this: it implies the consciousness of ability to estimate the deeds of men so exactly as to determine with unerring justice their everlasting state. How far beyond the reach of mere human nature such a claim is, it is easy to see. [Stalker, *The Christianity of Jesus*, p. 241.]

This simple but all-significant fact of the connection between the Person and the teaching, which is patent to every reader of the Gospels, has been felt ever since the days of Christ. Just as the Jews opposed Him because He made Himself equal with God, because His teaching implied and involved immense claims for Himself, so men have never been able to rest long in His teaching alone; it has inevitably led them up to His personality and compelled them to face His claims. Besides, ideas alone never save and inspire lives; they must have a personality behind to give them reality, vitality and dynamic.

A disciple is more than a scholar, and inspiration is more than instruction. Christ's words are of permanent value because of His Person; they endure because He endures. The egoism of all this has to be reckoned

with much more seriously than is sometimes done by men who profess to accept Jesus as Teacher while denying him as Lord. The self-assertion of Christ is either a serious blot on His character or an integral part of a gracious and deliberate saving purpose of God. [Johnston Ross, *The Universality of Jesus*, p. 122.]

It is simply impossible to accept the teachings without acknowledging the claim of the Teacher. So inextricably are they bound up that men in sacrificing the one are not long before they let the other go also. It is an utterly illogical and impossible position for anyone to accept the Sermon on the Mount without recognizing the full claims of Christ as Master and Judge which He made in that discourse. It will in the long run, I believe, be found impossible to maintain supreme reverence for the character of Jesus, and to reject the truth of His ideas.

The character is simply the ideas translated into temper and conduct. If the ideas are illusory, then the character is not in accordance with the nature of things, and in such a case it is not what we ought to imitate or admire. All such admiration is simple sentimentality; it is not ethical, and it stands in the way of human progress. But if we cannot face this, if we feel, in spite of ourselves, awe and veneration for the character of Jesus, we must, sooner or later, go on to faith in the ideas. [Cairns, *Christianity in the Modern World*, p. 19.]

Christianity in its final and ultimate analysis is the acceptance of the Person, not the teaching of Christ. He came not so much to teach as to redeem, and redemption involves His Person, His community of believing followers, His relation to and rule over their lives. As Dr. R. W. Dale used to say, Jesus Christ came not to preach the Gospel, but that there might be a Gospel to preach. And it is the Gospel which He Himself is rather than anything He ever taught that constitutes Christianity.

What think ye of the teaching? is an interesting, valuable inquiry. But, What think ye of the Teacher? is far more important, and more vital and central to the issues involved in the problem before us.

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